

An Analysis of Transmisogyny in Anime and Anime Fan Culture

1. Introduction

One of the most well-known viral memes that has sprung up as a result of the spread of Japanese animation (otherwise known as anime) to Western audiences has been the meme phrase of “Are traps gay?”. In anime fan culture, a trap is considered to be a character who is a beautiful woman externally, but is secretly a man with a penis. Thus, the question of “Are traps gay?” has sprung up as a meme. As Natalie Wynn, a transgender YouTuber, activist, and philosopher explains, “Are Traps Gay? The meme that will not die. Originating around 15 years ago on 4chan, the word trap refers to either a male crossdresser or a transgender woman, especially in the context of neotenous kawaii decadence. The meme, Are Traps Gay? is a mostly jokey debate about the sexuality of men who are attracted to dickgirls, futanari, [and] MTFs (transgender women).” This is a rhetorical question that plays on male heterosexual fears of being seen as gay, and the question posits that being attracted to these characters makes you gay. Outside of anime, the term has also been applied to real-world transfeminine people, and the transgender community does consider the word trap to be a harmful slur that plays onto the idea that the existence of transgender women “traps” or tricks men into having sex with them unknowingly. Anime and the fan culture that has sprung up around it in the west perpetuates transphobia, both in media and against real-life people. The brunt of this transphobia is directed at transgender women, in a prejudice that is known as transmisogyny. The medium of anime, and the fandom that has sprung up around it in the West, perpetuate real-word transmisogyny, due to anime meme culture, issues with the representation of transfeminine characters, and the very real problem of transphobia in modern Japanese culture.

2. “Are Traps Gay?” & The Rise of Anime Meme Culture Online

In George Lucas’ *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*, there is a scene in which the character Admiral Ackbar shouts the now-infamous line “It’s a trap!”. Later, image macros and GIFs (a digital file format that is both lossless and small enough to share over the terrible internet connections of the early aughts on message boards) spread across the English-speaking internet areas where anime fans congregated circa 2005. Namely, sites like SomethingAwful and 4chan. SomethingAwful (a comedy website that had forums) and 4chan both function as areas where internet users can share ideas, talk about their favorite anime, and spread horrific misinformation about transgender women via Star Wars memes.

4chan, as it describes itself, is "a simple image-based bulletin board where anyone can post comments and share images. There are boards dedicated to a variety of topics, from Japanese animation and culture to videogames, music, and photography. Users do not need to register an account before participating in the community." (4chan) Interestingly, 4chan was started as the unofficial English-language version of the Japanese Futaboard website, which was often referred to as 2chan. 4chan consists of boards that users can post on. These boards are primarily organized based off of topics, such as politics, anime, pornographic material, and My Little Pony. Due to being essentially an English rip-off of 2chan, some of the first boards on 4chan were for the sharing of memes related to anime and the discussion of anime.

Anime fandom is a large part of the culture of the site, and much of the success of 4chan owes itself to the fact that a centralized place to discuss anime for English speakers did not exist outside of the forums on a rapidly dying comedy website. Quickly, a significant portion of the discussion of anime began to be focused on characters that a mostly-male audience found

themselves attracted to. This is now commonplace on other websites such as Reddit which during the height of the Game of Thrones craze featured countless discussions of various female characters' breasts, and Tumblr which has been focused on discussing the Winchester brothers from Supernatural for the better part of 15 years.

However, unlike the shows that Tumblr users and Reddit users fixated on, a lot of anime feature feminine male characters. These characters would be considered assigned-male-at-birth (AMAB) in real life, but often dress and act in feminine ways, often to the point that at first glance, these characters could be assumed to be female. Because these characters are intended to 'pass', or be assumed at first glance to be assigned female at birth (AFAB) female characters, they are sexualized to the same degree that cisnormative female characters are for the male gaze. However, as they are AMAB characters, they also have/are implied to have male sexual organs, namely, a penis.

In 2005, homosexuality was still highly stigmatized and derided. To be gay or to have gay thoughts was seen as something worth of mockery. Thus, anything that could possibly be seen as gay, regardless if it actually involved homosexual sex, was to be mocked. This included things like hugging male friends as a man, dancing, "chick flicks" or movies directed towards a primarily female audience, and attraction to anyone with a penis, including transgender women.

These feminized AMAB characters in anime were largely conflated with transgender women on places like 4chan, and attraction to them was seen as pseudo-homosexual behavior. Thus, on pictures of these femme AMAB characters, people would often respond with the Admiral Ackbar image macro that proclaimed "It's a trap!". In this context, "trap", refers to the idea that transgender women are tricking or "trapping" straight men into having sex with them,

because, in their logic, a truly heterosexual man would not be attracted to these women unless he did not know that she had a penis rather than a vagina. Of course, the knowledge that transgender women have penises does not actually lessen the attraction of the straight men that find themselves attracted to gender expansive women. As Natalie Wynn states, ‘is just an obvious fact about our everyday experience in the world. We know who's attracted to us and who isn't. So to us, this completely unnecessary debate is as impractical as the question of whether the sun will rise tomorrow....It's just a basic fact of experience that the sun rises every morning, and for trans[gender] women it's a basic fact of experience that the people who are attracted to us, are people who are attracted to women. Of the cis[gender] men I've been with since I started my transition, all identify as straight, and all had only been with cis[gender] women before this tran[s woman] came along.’ (Wynn 2019). Additionally, as she points out further on in her video essay, “I think the booming popularity of t-girl porn speaks for itself. On Pornhub the Shemale category contains more videos than other such popular categories... And it's mostly straight men who watch it. When adultempire.com moved their t-girl content from their gay site to their straight site, views increased 50%.” (Wynn 2019) Thus, the “It’s a trap!” meme serves to both signify and remind heterosexual men that they are veering too close to what is perceived by other users to be homosexuality, which as previously mentioned has long been seen as something worthy of derision.

It is very clear that a lot of the anime fans on 4chan are ashamed of their sexual attraction to trans-coded and characters that are not strictly cisgender, and the virality of the “It’s a trap!” meme has added to this shame. While a lot of these cross-dressing characters are not actually transgender, the conflation of these anime characters to real-world transgender women has lead

to a slew of real-life transfeminine people to be called the slur “trap”, and popularized a follow-up meme: “Are Traps Gay?”

The “Are Traps Gay?” meme is discussed at length in Natalie Wynn’s video by the same name, but to summarize it briefly, it is a meme that attempts to both defend and attack heterosexual men who are attracted to transgender women by having a debate about whether it is homosexual behavior to be attracted to transgender women. The debate is shrouded in a general air of humor, which allows criticisms of transphobia to be dodged with the defense of it being merely a joke. The original intent of “trap” being a reference to anime characters is by this point lost, and both memes now contribute to real-world transphobia. It is important to note that transgender women (primarily black transgender women) have been murdered due to this. Straight men who murder transgender women often claim that they had no idea that she was transgender until her penis was revealed to them, at which point they feel threatened and are afraid, and murder her out of self-defense. This is commonly known as the trans panic defense. This defense is still commonly used, and sometimes works (Rhodes 2021). As such, the anime meme culture that is deeply rooted in transphobia that has spread on 4chan can lead to real world violence against transgender people, despite the fact that true transgender representation in anime is exceedingly rare, and anime ends up unintentionally perpetuating real-world transphobia.

3. Transfeminine Representation in Anime

True representation of transgender people, particularly transmasculine people, is rare in anime. Transfeminine people are transgender people who were assigned male at birth and now identify in some way with femininity rather than masculinity, and includes both feminine nonbinary people and transgender women. Transmasculine people are the reverse, and include

both masculine nonbinary people and transgender men. Transfeminine representation in anime can broadly be divided into three categories: crossdressing men, true transfeminine people, and ambiguously feminine men.

Crossdressing is defined as “wearing clothing typical of the opposite sex” (or gender, to use more modern terminology), according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Crossdressing in both American and Japanese media is usually played for laughs, and examples of this “crossdressing for comedy” are widespread. In the Pokémon anime, the character James of Team Rocket crossdresses frequently. Usually, the plot is contrived such that there is some sort of situation that requires James to crossdress as a woman to sneak into a situation. This is always done to make the audience laugh, and some episodes even include James having fake breasts for the laughs. In Demon Slayer during the third season, the three main characters crossdress to disguise themselves as geisha, and their efforts are used as a comedic moment in an otherwise serious anime. Another example of this comedic crossdressing is in part two of Jojo’s Bizarre Adventures. In part two, Joseph Joestar dresses as a woman in order to sneak past two Nazis, but his crossdressing is meant to be a moment of humor and is intended for comedic ridicule..Crossdressing men are one of the most common examples of transfeminine representation, but it is important to note that crossdressing and transgender identity are not equivalent, and to conflate the two would be both disingenuous and transphobic. Crossdressers play with their gender expression for entertainment, sexual pleasure, or for fashion, but still identify as their assigned gender at birth, even when crossdressing. A man in a dress is just that, a man in a dress. They also do not crossdress full time and in the words of Bob the Drag Queen “At some point, honey, you’re getting a man!”. Transgender people are the gender they say they are full time, and thus a transgender woman in a dress is simply a woman in a dress.

Ambiguously feminine men are the next common category of transfeminine representation. These examples include men who have physically feminine features and men who dress in an androgynous way. These characters have a male gender identity, but their gender expression is less definitively masculine and is usually androgynous, if not feminine. This is sometimes played for laughs and is sometimes not, and is instead just a feature of the character. A real world analogue to these feminine men is the trend of “genderless fashion” in Japan. Examples of these characters in anime include the titular wizard character Howl from the Studio Ghibli film *Howl's Moving Castle*. His gender identity is clearly male, as he ends up with a female character, and he uses the personal pronouns “he” and “him”, but his gender expression is more ambiguous, with vaguely effeminate clothing that include flowy blouses. For an American audience he reads as a very androgynous character. Another example of an ambiguously feminine male character is the character of Fish Eye from *Sailor Moon*. This character is a male character with very feminine facial features, and he wears very androgynous clothing in the anime. He is androgynous to the point that in the American release of *Sailor Moon*, he was changed into a female character and voiced by a female VA, despite the author's intent for him to be a male character. Another example of an androgynous/ambiguously feminine character is Armin Arlert in the anime *Attack on Titan*. In the anime, he is a male character with feminine facial features, and so many fans have been confused about Armin's gender that the creator has even joked about it. These androgynous characters often broaden the limits of what was previously seen as acceptable levels of femininity for men, both within anime and outside of it, but they are still male characters and not true transfeminine representation.

Finally, the rarest example of transfeminine representation is true representation. This representation consists of on-screen characters that are actually transgender women or

transfeminine non-binary character. In the 2018 anime, *Zombieland Saga*, the character Lily is a transgender little girl who was born male. Her gender identity is respected by her fellow idols, and her identity as a girl is taken seriously in the framing of the anime. However, progress is still needed because not only is this a rare example, in the lore of the show, her gender dysphoria led to such stress that she died of a heart attack, which is a transphobic trope that plays into the idea that transgender people are tortured and miserable, and that there is no joy in being transgender. The fact that this example is so rare is unsurprising due to the current state of transgender liberation and rights in Japan, and this is reflected in what little true representation there is of transfeminine characters in anime.

4. Transgender Rights & Transgender Liberation in Japan

Globally, transgender people are one of the most oppressed minorities, and this is not markedly any different in Japan. Legal recognition of transgender people's gender identity was not legally recognized until 2004 in Japan, and in order to be recognized as the gender that they identify as, transgender people in Japan must be unmarried, have no children under the age of 20, and undergo both sexual reassignment surgery (known more accurately as gender affirmation surgeries) and sterilization. This is a wildly discriminatory law that pretends to be progressive. First off, it prevents transgender people from being married if they want to be legally recognized as their gender, and to have the protections that that brings. Additionally, gender affirmation surgeries are not wanted by all transgender people, nor are they necessary for someone to be truly transgender. The view that transgender people must medically transition via hormone replacement therapy and surgery is known as transmedicalism, and is an oppressive viewpoint that prevents true transgender liberation.

This has been somewhat changed as of April 2022, in which transgender people are now allowed to change their legal gender at the age of 18 rather than 22, as long as they have a formal medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria and have been irreversibly sterilized. This is still a problem, due to that fact that not all transgender people experience gender dysphoria, and the forcible sterilization of transgender people is eugenics. Resistance to these laws in Japan has been limited, as the first march for transgender rights occurred in November of 2021. (“Japan’s First Trans March Held in Tokyo’s Shinjuku Area to Raise Awareness on Rights,” 2021)

Transgender rights are still in their infancy in Japan and have much further to progress before transgender people in Japan can be considered to be truly liberated. As such, representation of true transfeminine characters is limited due to most mainstream Japanese audiences simply being unaware of transgender people’s existence. Additionally, from a Western lens, this lack of representation means that the transmisogynistic memes continue to be strongly associated with anime rather than true transfeminine characters. As a result, anime continues to perpetuate transphobia.

5. Conclusion

In summary, anime reflects Japanese culture when it comes to transmisogyny. Japanese culture is still at a place of infancy when it comes to transgender rights, and most cisgender people have not been exposed to transgender people. As a result of this lack of exposure, there is a serious lack of transfeminine representation in anime, and most representation ends up being of male crossdressers and androgynous men. True transfeminine representation is rare.

Additionally, because fandom often reflects the values of whatever the fanbase is based around, transphobia and transmisogyny are stunningly prevalent in the American anime fandom. These transmisogynistic ideas have been mimicked by the memes that have sprung up on anime

discussion hubs such as 4chan, particularly with the “It’s a trap!” image macro that is used predominantly in response to any feminine characters and the resulting debate of “Are traps gay?” which both can and has led to real-world transmisogyny and violence against transfeminine people. As a result of all of this, anime, whether intentionally or not, perpetuates transmisogyny.

Reference

Condry, Ian. *The Soul of Anime : Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story*.

Durham, Duke University Press, 2013.

Dunlap, Kathryn and Carissa Wolf. "Fans Behaving Badly: Anime Metafandom, Brutal

Criticism, and the Intellectual Fan." *Mechademia*, vol. 5, 2010, p. 267-283. *Project*

MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/400561.

Ferdinand, Ruben. "An Essay about JoJo's Bizarre Adventure and Queer Masculinities."

Medium, 7 Apr. 2019,

urbanfriendedden.medium.com/an-essay-about-jojos-bizarre-adventure-and-queer-masculinities-5d3b5f25567b.

Susan Jolliffe Napier. *Animé from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle : Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Works CitedHo, Michelle H. S. *An Ethnography of Crossdressing: Gender Politics and Queer Belongings in Contemporary Japan*, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Ann Arbor, 2018. *ProQuest*,

<https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/ethnography-crossdressing-gender-politics-queer/docview/2075061451/se-2?accountid=14553>.

Wynn, Natalie. "'Are Traps Gay?' | ContraPoints." *YouTube*, 16 Jan. 2019,

www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbBzhqJK3bg.

4chan. (n.d.). Wwww.4chan.org. <https://www.4chan.org>

Japan's first trans march held in Tokyo's Shinjuku area to raise awareness on rights. (2021,

November 22). *Mainichi Daily News*.

<https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20211122/p2a/00m/0na/006000c>

Lee, C., & Kwan, P. (2014). The Trans Panic Defense: Masculinity, Heteronormativity, and the Murder of Transgender Women. *Hastings Law Journal*, 66, 77.

<https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/hastlj66&div=6&id=&page=>

Rhodes, A. (2021, December 20). *Gay And Trans "Panic" Is Still Being Used To Justify*

Anti-LGBTQ Attacks. The Appeal. <https://theappeal.org/gay-trans-panic-defense/>